

HOW TO REMEDY OUR "PUERTO RICAN PROBLEM"

Whence It Arose: What to Do

CHARLES ABRAMS

EVERY day a few hundred Puerto Ricans can be seen at the San Juan airport waiting to get on planes for New York. There are women with babies, young people and old, some colored, some white. Suitcases and crude bundles are by their sides. There are gesticulations, the bustle of hurried farewells, some tears. Soon a roar of engines signals another departure from America's teeming little island in the Caribbean—and another group added to the teeming sidewalks and tenements of New York City.

The Puerto Rican journey is unique in the record of mass movement to this continent. It is a six and a half hour trip by air, not the arduous two to three weeks' sea voyage from Europe of half a century ago. Return to

IF THE Puerto Rican migration to New York City has taken on the aspects of a "problem," the responsibility belongs more to mainland Americans than to our American fellow citizens of the Islands. The problem itself, says CHARLES ABRAMS here, is a reflection on our supposed capacity for social solutions; and the general tendency of officialdom and plain citizens alike to avert their eyes from the problem and hush it up reflects on our social conscience, too. Mr. Abrams's article is aimed at helping "break the problem wide open with the view of setting people to discuss it in order to find a solution, or solutions, that will permit our new neighbors to contribute their humanity as well as their labor to the community." Mr. Abrams, New York State's new Rent Administrator, is an old and steady contributor to COMMENTARY; he has written widely on housing and other social problems and has two books already to his credit—*Revolution in Land* and *The Future of Housing*—and Harper will publish another one, *Forbidden Neighbors*, next month. The present article draws on material from that book, as did Mr. Abrams's article "Only the Very Best Christian Clientele" in our January number.

Puerto Rico is easy and swift, and since living here is uncomfortable and the chances of establishing a secure foothold uncertain, the pull-back to the island continues strong and the stay on the mainland is as likely to be temporary as permanent. The number of Puerto Ricans here at any one time is therefore small in proportion to the total of those who come and go.*

If, instead of moving out over the country, the Puerto Rican has concentrated in a single port of entry, one reason is that ease of exit is often in his mind. The uncertainty of the migrant's position and the tensions in his new environment cause him to think of himself as a transient; he is in turn treated as a transient, undesired and undesirable; in the end, he *becomes* a transient.

Although the Puerto Rican influx is thought of as an immigration, it is, properly speaking, an internal migration, i.e., a movement within the United States, not of aliens, but of citizens. And this migration is unique in another respect. These Puerto Rican citizens, in an era of unprecedented mobility, are being limited by official policy in their opportunity to seek employment freely. This, coupled with local housing restrictions and the Puerto Rican's own unwillingness to challenge such restrictions, limits his free movement into other areas of opportunity.

BY AND large, however, whether migrant or immigrant, the Puerto Rican comes into New York City much as did the immigrant from Southern Europe up to forty

*Between 1940 and mid-1953 there were more than 1,850,000 in-migrants and about 1,430,000 out-migrants, but since they included tourists, businessmen, and students, the number of those who came to stay and returned is unknown. Curiously, no surveys have been taken at the airports to determine the precise reasons for departures.

years ago. The Puerto Rican has left his home so that he can better his lot by his labor, and the United States urgently needs the labor he can supply, at the wages he gets. But once here, he is left to fend for himself, since the society that needs his labor prefers to forget about him as a human being. Consequently, there is a Puerto Rican "problem," just as there was an immigrant "problem" half a century ago. Yet the fact that today the "problem" is recognized and named does not mean that anything fundamental is being done about it, or that its causes are understood.

It is no wonder, then, that more than half the 500,000 Puerto Ricans now in New York City would like to return to their island if only they could support themselves and their families there. And no wonder, too, that so many of them do return in spite of everything, and that in 1954 net migration from Puerto Rico fell from 69,124 the year before to 21,531—a drop of 68.8 per cent. This drop emphasizes the trailing off, for the time being at least, of a movement that started with only a few thousand a year in 1940 and had spiraled by 1953 to a point where one in every twenty New Yorkers was a Puerto Rican.

What has turned the Puerto Rican migration into a "problem" is not its size—there were probably never more than 575,000 non-visitor Puerto Ricans on the mainland. By comparison, there are 15,000,000 Negroes here, and no less than 2,700,000 Negroes migrated from one state to another between 1940 and 1947, with 1,180,000 of these moving between non-contiguous states. Between 1942 and 1947, the Federal government itself brought in 219,500 Mexicans. In 1950, the known "Wetback" traffic was ten times as great as the net Puerto Rican immigration, and many "Wetbacks" have become a permanent part of the rural working force. Puerto Rico's whole population, which amounts to 2,250,000, could be absorbed in America's expanding economy within a few years without causing any more strain than the absorption of like numbers of immigrants has in the past.

THE factors that make up the Puerto Rican problem are: first, the overwhelming concentration of Puerto Ricans in one place—New York City—and the sordid conditions under which they are forced to live there; second, the circumstances that make it difficult for newcomers to establish *secure* footholds over here, thus preventing them from becoming an organic part of the community; last, but not less important, Puerto Rico's own difficulties as an overcrowded area suffering from low living standards, limited economic opportunities, and mass unemployment.

To the majority of Puerto Ricans, New York and the United States are synonymous. New York is where friends and relatives live, where the home language is spoken, where the air lanes end. Riding the air to the new utopia, the migrants have visions of magic casements opening on electric refrigerators, flush toilets, and bathtubs. But the skyscrapers that greet the migrant from afar soon fade into the dark and dirty tenement neighborhood that becomes his new horizon.

In the last twelve months I have traveled some 75,000 miles on housing missions for the United Nations. With some embarrassment, I have had to conclude that the slums in Harlem where most Puerto Ricans have found shelter are among the worst in the world. In the sub-marginal areas of Asia and Africa economic conditions are, of course, critical. But the housing problem is often less critical. There is the redeeming feature of a warm climate; the crowding per acre is usually less; there is often an external environment that offsets the squalor within the house itself. Amid all the poverty, there is a semblance of a community and a community life. All this holds true for the slums of San Juan and Ponce, too, whence most of the Puerto Rican migrants to the United States come.

In Harlem, however, there is little or no community life for the Puerto Ricans, and overcrowding is so intense that family morale and family structure are virtually impossible to sustain—a factor responsible for the large number of Spanish names

in the Family Court and in Youth Term. Living in a cold climate, a strange environment, and threatened with homelessness should he miss a single rental payment, the migrant must make a superhuman effort if he is to sink any kind of roots at all here and maintain them.

In Harlem I saw a six-story, 25-foot-wide tenement on East 100th Street in which 170 Puerto Ricans were living. Rents were about \$16 a month per room; the apartments were shared; 12 people were living in one three-room apartment. Every hall window was broken. Splintered stair treads sank perilously with each step. Almost every toilet was out of order. Plaster hung from the hall ceilings; great heaps of garbage rotted under the stairways; a dead rat lay on a landing. There were 481 officially reported cases of rat bites in New York in 1952, and since it is estimated that only one in five cases is reported, this means that some 2,500 human beings—mostly babies—are bitten by rats every year. Most of these cases are reported from the Harlem slums.

In another ancient tenement on the same street there were 15 people in a four-room apartment; in another, 18 people occupied a three-room unit. On East 108th Street, two stores were being used as living quarters, a condition now common throughout the city. The tenants said they paid \$28 monthly per store. The plate glass was broken, the windows boarded up. There were no closets, no lights, no baths. Clothes were laid on trunks or on the floor. Children slept in cold, dark, and airless space, separated from their parents by makeshift curtains.

On East 100th Street I found 25 people living in a dark and airless coal cellar ten feet below street level. The cellar was divided into two vaults—one under the sidewalk, the other in the rear—and had once stored old furniture and garbage cans. Each vault was divided by brick walls into what had originally been coal bins, and in each bin now lived a family. Iron cellar doors at sidewalk level kept out both light and air. Here these people ate, slept, washed, and reproduced. There were 17 children, the

youngest born two weeks before. Almost all of the children had been sick during the preceding weeks. One had been hospitalized only a few days before. One of the mothers was confined to her bed under the sidewalk while trying to feed, clothe, and care for her children.

In Brooklyn and elsewhere, flimsy one-family firetraps shelter ten or more families, each herded into a single room and doing its own cooking on a coal or oil stove. (There were more than 600 fires caused by kerosene-oil stoves in New York City in 1953.) Even minimum accommodations in these neighborhoods cannot be got without paying key-money, or several hundred dollars down and a ransom rental thereafter.

BAD as the situation is for the white Puerto Rican, it is worse for the colored. New York City has a famous skyline, and an equally famous color-line. Both have occasional rainbows, like the city's inter-racial housing program and anti-bias laws. But, though New York City is one of the nation's most tolerant places, it has never been able to put an end to housing discrimination.

Migration transforms the darker Puerto Rican into an American Negro—even among his own lighter countrymen, who soon learn that difference in color means difference in status. The colored migrants have fewer opportunities and less incentive to become part of the mainland culture. Their only chance is to look and act conspicuously different from the native Negro.

But there is housing bias against most Puerto Ricans—light and dark. The "Spic," as the Spanish-speaking slum-dweller is scornfully called, is rated a less desirable tenant than the native Negro, whose pattern of infiltration, inundation, and outspread he is being forced to follow. And he is meeting even greater resistance. Most landlords with a long-term interest in their property can never be sure as to how many people will eventually live in an apartment rented to a Puerto Rican, whether his job or his stay is permanent, and whether he will have enough left from his earnings to pay the rent. Used

to sharing huts at home in Puerto Rico, the new arrivals tend to follow the practice in New York, if only for the sake of economy.

There are landlords, big and little, who make a specialty of buying slum properties for Puerto Rican occupancy because they yield 30 to 100 per cent a year on investment. Some of these landlords are veteran operators attracted by the high yields; others are profiteering tenants who have branched out into landlordism; still others are small-time lessees seeking to recover their investment in one or two years by exacting illicit bonuses and charging all the traffic will bear. Houses that rent to Puerto Ricans bring high returns because repairs are never made; because the legitimate real-estate investor and mortgage-lender generally shuns such ventures, which eliminates a good deal of competition; because the owners (some of them shoestring operators or lessees from the minority groups themselves) are willing to run the risks of operating properties plastered with violations, and have mastered the technique of evading rent controls and dodging or appeasing housing inspectors. Strict enforcement by city officials of violation notices is difficult since the tenants have no alternative accommodations when the houses are ordered vacated. Prosecution in the courts has become a tedious and often impossible task.

A grand jury investigating the death of seven Puerto Ricans living in an illegally occupied Brooklyn tinderbox in 1952 reported:

Shocked as we were by the death of seven persons, we were more appalled as the evidence adduced before us disclosed that the greatest city in the world is surely but not slowly being permitted to deteriorate and decay. . . . Occupancy of dark, damp and filthy cellars that defy description, and families, of six, seven and more, cooking and eating and sleeping in one room lacking proper toilet facilities, are spreading the slum blight.

Officials of the Migration Division of the Puerto Rican Labor Department in New York City have tried to minimize the situation by pointing to past immigration. But conditions for the Puerto Rican migrants

are far worse than they were for the immigrant in New York or Chicago in the 19th and early 20th century. There was the frontier as an escape. Housing could be built on free land through self-help, often with materials freely available nearby. In New York City, new, if sub-standard, tenements were built in the last century that provided housing at rents the immigrants could afford. Nothing of the sort is being done for the Puerto Ricans.

Nor does there seem to be a ready solution to the Puerto Rican housing problem in New York. Limiting the number of persons per room and strict enforcement of violations would only mean more evictions. New York's combined city, state, and Federal postwar housing program, designed mainly to replace slums, and producing some 6,500 dwelling units a year, has become meaningless in the face of the influx of new candidates for its slums. It has added little to the over-all housing supply and even if doubled will mean little, if migration from Puerto Rico continues even at its current reduced rate.

Worse still, the city's policy of tearing down overcrowded areas in the name of "slum clearance," instead of building on vacant land, is dislodging almost a quarter of a million slum-dwellers from their homes. Instead of relieving overcrowding, it is intensifying it; instead of diminishing slums, it is spreading them elsewhere; instead of easing the housing shortage, it is worsening it; instead of aiding Puerto Rican adjustment, it is frustrating it.

THOUGH New Yorkers are apt to grumble about their new neighbors, the Puerto Rican immigration has been a boon to employers, bringing a rich supply of the cheap labor, skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled, they so urgently need. Less than 8 per cent of those on relief in the city, in 1953, were Puerto Ricans. About 20,000 Puerto Ricans, mostly women, have been absorbed by the garment industry, and about 16,000 men by hotels and restaurants, while tens of thousands of others have found light factory work

or employment in building and domestic service. The Puerto Ricans have earned the respect of employers and are considered dependable employees. They are, however, among the lowest paid of all workers in the city, and easily exploited because so few of them know about the 75-cent minimum hourly wage.

Despite their handicaps, many of the earlier migrants from Puerto Rico have been able to make some sort of an adjustment, and have succeeded in breaking through to the Central Park West section, Chelsea, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. However, the overcrowding of some of these areas, and the inundation of the schools with Puerto Rican children, have spread resentment and caused older residents to move away.

Although four of every five of the migrants from Puerto Rico stop in New York City, small clusters of them are to be found now in Bridgeport, Newark, Passaic, the Philadelphia area, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Youngstown, Cleveland, Lorain, Gary, Chicago, Aurora, Joliet, Savannah, and Milwaukee. These clusters, if they stay, should in time draw more Puerto Ricans, and there is evidence of permanent settlement in some of these areas. But all too often the migrants slip back to the island at the first signs of hardship.

In Youngstown, Ohio, the Puerto Rican community was about 3,000 in the summer of 1953. By November 1954, after steel production had been cut, half the community departed. The airline records show that almost all the workers returned to Puerto Rico. In other areas where Puerto Ricans are sent for jobs without their families, loneliness drives them back to the island or to the metropolis.

THE Puerto Rican migration is rural as well as urban at its source. Yet, though agriculture is Puerto Rico's main activity, and, in 1950, 60 per cent of its population lived outside the towns and cities, nine-tenths of the migrants to the United States are from urban places. Moreover, while farm workers are in constant demand on the main-

land, and unemployment on the island is greatest in agriculture, only a trickle of Puerto Rican agricultural labor settles in the United States permanently; such migration as there is, is largely seasonal, comprising some 15,000 farm workers who come in the spring and return in the fall, when their contracts are finished. Only a few thousand other farm workers arrive without contracts.

There are several reasons for the mainland's failure to draw off Puerto Rico's excess farm population. One is the American policy of preferring aliens to citizens for agricultural labor. American fruit, vegetable, and tobacco growers employ workers from the British West Indies and from Mexico by permission of the U. S. Employment Service, which supervises the flow of contract labor to the United States. These foreign workers are simply sent home when the season is over. Moreover, as aliens, they are more vulnerable in the event of disagreement over wages, work, and shelter. Puerto Ricans, as citizens, can in principle assert their rights to go where they choose and claim the same social benefits as other Americans. Puerto Rican farmhands might drift to cities and seek jobs there when their work on the land was finished; this, it was apparently feared, would create a "minority problem" that would bring pressure on their erstwhile employers from the authorities of the cities and towns concerned.

To meet the problem, the U.S. Employment Service and the Puerto Rican government have an agreement under which no Puerto Rican contract labor will be sent to any state unless the state director of employment certifies that a shortage of labor exists there. Puerto Rico's Bureau of Employment and Migration considers it as its duty to regulate the flow of migration to the mainland in order to prevent migrants from dislocating "the American workers who are already in the areas to which they migrate."

The Puerto Rican government asserts that this certification agreement protects the worker against unscrupulous farmers and agents. It might. But the Puerto Rican himself still comes last. Priorities go to aliens

who do not have to wait for certification—nor, of course, do American citizens on the mainland. Thus the Puerto Rican waits his turn after other American citizens, after Mexicans (legal and illegal), and after West Indians.

As it is, the easing of Puerto Rico's overpopulation is being accomplished, not through a permanent rural emigration followed by a gradual absorption into the mainland economy, but by a concentrated urban migration that drains off the island's skilled and semi-skilled labor, and is aimed almost exclusively at New York City. One reason offered for the overwhelming concentration in New York is that newcomers are usually apt to go where their friends are. Another reason given is the housing shortage throughout the country. A third is the unfamiliarity of many Puerto Ricans with the English language—a handicap not shared by the Negro.

These reasons do hold, of course. But there are other reasons that are not usually emphasized: the failure to encourage enough cheap air trips to other parts of the United States; the much exaggerated fear of encountering neighborhood opposition in the North or discriminatory treatment in the South; the failure of the Puerto Ricans themselves to develop the leaders and leadership needed for a planned migration.

The Puerto Rican government itself has chosen a policy of caution. It not only limits farm contract labor to the precise number certified by state authorities, but also functions as the principal employment agent and advisor for its subjects already here, thereby retaining some control over their movements. It is afraid of what may happen to Puerto Ricans in places that have a bad record for racial riots, and for similar reasons has hesitated to encourage Puerto Ricans to go from the more tolerant metropolis to the South. Well-intentioned though the Commonwealth's policy has been, it still puts the Puerto Rican workers in a position where the good jobs are preempted by others. In contrast, the Negro, after the 1920's, made

his move to the cities, braved opposition, competed for jobs, and established firm footholds and strong communities with respected leadership. The blame for this situation must be shared by our own Federal government.

Meanwhile impartial appraisals of the situation are wanting. Civic-minded individuals and the press are chary of speaking out for fear of exposing themselves to accusations of bias. City officials have been swayed by political motives. The Puerto Rican government fears unfavorable public reaction. Congressmen are under the pressure of those who prefer illegal Mexicans to citizen labor. The public reaction to the recent assault and attempted murder of Congressmen by Puerto Rican nationalist fanatics, as well as that to the earlier attempted assassination of President Truman, was a remarkable demonstration of restraint and tolerance. But the official silence which accompanied it evidenced, at least in some respects, a stubborn refusal to look into the factors responsible for the Puerto Rican problem and the remedies which might help alleviate it.

OF COURSE, some of the main roots of the Puerto Rican problem lie in Puerto Rico itself. A people with a high birth rate is confined to a relatively small island. In 1950, population density in Puerto Rico was 645 persons to the square mile—at a similar density, the United States would have a population of 1,900 million. The average farmer's wife in Puerto Rico has about seven children, and 29 per cent of rural mothers average ten or more. This rate falls sharply in town and city where about 29 per cent of the families have one, two, or three children. A rapidly declining mortality rate, coupled with a rising birth rate, gives Puerto Rico one of the fastest-growing populations in the world.

Competition for jobs in Puerto Rico is keen; wages are low. The median income of all money-earners fourteen years and over in 1949 was \$378 per annum—\$617 in the urban, and only \$275 in the rural areas. About half the total population fourteen

years and over earned no income at all. Low incomes are reflected in poor living conditions. About 40 per cent of the people sleep in rooms with four or more persons; many of the houses are ramshackle and cannot withstand the island's hurricanes; most households have no ovens; many get their drinking water from ditches.

Yet the climate is mild, the environment good, and social relations easy. Though one of every four Puerto Ricans is a Negro, color distinctions are of no importance except among the white elite, and intermarriage is general. If social life has to be carried on in the street, it is at least the bright plaza, never the cold and dreary slum street of the metropolis.

The federally aided public housing program has helped, too. Puerto Rico's three housing authorities built more than 10,000 low-rent dwellings by 1953, and moved several thousand salvageable houses from squatter villages to new areas. But when I asked the director of the Puerto Rico Housing Authority if he thought public housing would ever solve the island's housing problem, he pointed to the birth chart and shrugged his shoulders.

Tax exemption to firms establishing factories on the island has improved work opportunities. Since 1940, thanks largely to the efforts of President Luis Munoz-Marin, net income has risen from \$238,000,000 to \$891,000,000, lifting per capita net income from \$122 to more than \$400. Public school enrollment has gone up and unemployment has fallen sharply. A new land law has distributed acreage to 28,000 farm families, and another 60,000 are expected to be settled in six years. Life expectancy went from forty-six years in 1940 to sixty-one years, and the death rate fell from 18.9 per thousand to 9.3—all of which has helped double the population and further increase the pressure for migration.

One proposal for removing the population pressure is to give the islanders independence. But this would cut off migration to the United States and only increase Puerto Rico's employment problem. We cannot

escape our obligations by such a course, and the island's people have consistently rejected independence when it was proposed.

A second proposal is education in contraception. This is difficult, partly because of Catholic opposition, partly because of the islanders' indifference, and partly because of their stubborn insistence upon having babies. Which reason counts most has not been determined, but poverty will continue to bring babies to the poor as long as parents see their children as their only protection against starvation in old age.

Statistics show, however, that contraception is not the answer and that the mainland itself can use all the babies Puerto Rico can produce. It is estimated that with an out-migration of 35,000 to 50,000 people annually, there is a fair chance that the population of the island would be stabilized in the next generation. And it can be safely said that 35,000 to 50,000 Puerto Rican migrants constitute only a fraction of what American industry could absorb. The United States in fact desperately needs this source of labor for its expansion.

The solution lies, not in limiting Puerto Rican numbers, but rather in our treating the Puerto Ricans as fellow citizens, enabling them to settle, once they come here, in the places that need them outside New York City. Above all, we need to recognize them as members of the community, with the same right to acceptance in the community and to the same help and understanding we extend to others.

BOTH the United States and the Commonwealth should undertake a national survey of labor opportunities and train Puerto Rican leaders to conduct groups of settlers to promising areas. The practice of waiting for actual job offerings to turn up before Puerto Rican labor is dispatched to the area should be modified to encourage settlement wherever there are fair probabilities of future jobs or the prospect of labor turnover. The U.S. Employment Service should act to discourage the importation of aliens to fill jobs that could go to the Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Rican settlers in areas outside New York should include both men and women. The current practice of omitting provisions for family life and permanent settlement is shortsighted and unrealistic. A survey should be made of the number of Puerto Ricans compelled to return to the island, and the reasons for their return. A more effective educational campaign in Puerto Rico itself should present the facts about job opportunities to the islanders and encourage them to migrate directly to where work is available. Airlines from Puerto Rico to as many large cities on the mainland as possible should be opened at reasonable rates. More widespread instruction in the English language, and preparation for the new conditions they will meet on the mainland, would speed their settlement and adjustment.

But all these measures will do little unless we are prepared to see the Puerto Rican problem and discuss it candidly, not merely in terms of political or sectional considerations, but with a higher regard for the sheer human values involved. And this will never occur unless both the Puerto Rican and United States governments are prepared to look at the migrant as an American citizen instead of an outsider with a split loyalty. If he is to have all the rights of a citizen—which he should have—then the main objective should be not less migration from Puerto Rico, but more. It should be directed not toward New York City primarily, but to every area of opportunity throughout the country. The "problem" of the Puerto Rican should be acknowledged as a problem, an American problem, demanding choices between alternatives—choices which may not, in the nature of things, be ideal, and which may indeed often be disagreeable. But American communities have been confronted with similar issues in the past, in the cases of other minorities, and they have demonstrated that at least in housing, employment, education, and social relations, they have been able to meet such issues and resolve them.

A realistic housing program for the lower-income groups in the cities is, of course, indispensable, and a rural resettlement program

is needed to encourage settlement on the farms. At the same time, Federal housing officials must stop the displacement of slum families by demolition operations. An effort should also be made to break the barriers that prevent minorities from obtaining access to land in the cities and suburbs and to make available living space in which to raise their families properly.

It is difficult of course to lay down uniform formulas for all cities when Puerto Ricans move into them. Much will depend on how far the local citizenry is prepared for the task and how much headway fears and rumors have already made in shaping attitudes. Firm policy, frank disclosure, sound public relations, the support of the local press and of public-interest groups, and a wholehearted interest in the program are the important factors here.

LAST but not least, the Puerto Rican migrants themselves must take some initiative in coping with their problems. So far they have shown—for understandable reasons—too little solidarity and cooperation, with or without outside guidance, in resisting prejudice and animosity, and have produced too little leadership of their own. Perhaps it is because they feel themselves so close to their homeland; because they think of themselves as transients; or because they have—fortunately—no traditions as a minority, not having been one at home.

Whatever the reason, the more than 60 per cent drop in migration in 1954, which has been prominently publicized by the Puerto Rican government and greeted with a sigh of relief in New York City, is not a boon but may well prove a tragedy. Conditions on the island still being what they are, it is a temporary drop at best, and less a symbol of improved conditions in Puerto Rico than of the failure of a migration to the continent. The main answer to the problem the island and the mainland share is not in lessening the flow of population to the mainland but in maintaining it and, above all, in helping the migrants sink firm roots throughout the country.